Voluntas (2008) 19:211–217
DOI 10.1007/s11266-008-9062-z

Book Reviews

Published online: 25 April 2008

John Keane (Ed.), *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives*, Berghahn, New York and Oxford, 2007, 262 pp., index, $29.95

Any book on civil society in Europe has a lot to contend with. For the continent has a rather tortuous history, a history that has, on the one hand, given us much in our current ideas of civil society, but that has also witnessed different totalitarian and fascist regimes. This project of explication becomes even more complicated when you incorporate the ongoing process of the construction of a supranational entity like the European Union. While the task is a difficult one to take on, the book under review does not balk at it. In 10 chapters, it offers different perspectives on the diverse aspects of civil society, perspectives ranging from the deeply reflective to the empirical. Rather than leave the reader with comfortable answers, the contributions in the volume problematize a lot of issues that scholars of European history and comparative studies of civil society will have to take up. What one gets is a feeling of "matters arising;" a conversation has been set off. This is the second in a series of volumes focusing on civil society in Europe, and features contributions from authors who are currently working in Berlin-based institutions, are affiliated to institutions based in the city, or have worked in academic institutions in Berlin at some point.

The book opens with an essay by Jürgen Kocka, who takes a historical perspective and explores the relationship between civil society, capitalism, the nation, and the state. He starts with a brief exploration of the history of the concept, after which he defines civil society as a social sphere related to but explicitly

Book review editor: Ebenezer Obadare.

Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd,
722 Fraser Hall, Lawrence, KS 6604-7556, USA
e-mail: obadare@ku.edu

different from private life, capitalist ventures, and government. He cautions that the idea of civil society does not equate to "real, existing societies" (p. 41). For real societies also include elements that are chaotic, fanatic, and violent. The tone this chapter sets reverberates through the volume. For instance, the relationship between civil society, civility, and violence forms the crux of Reichardt's chapter.

Paul Nolte's concern in his chapter is the relationship between civil society and social inequality. He calls for research that will synthesize, analyze, and historicize data on inequality and civil society in Western societies since the end of the Second World War. He also calls for a methodological shift that transgresses the qualitative/quantitative boundary, that combines both social research and social theory, and that melds contemporary analysis with historical contextualization. This kind of research, he says, will provide a better understanding of the relationship between civil society and social inequality. In the same vein, Hans Joas and Frank Adloff present empirical data that seem to confirm the fact that inequality is a breeding ground of sorts for civil society, and that civil society has not so much departed from its founding days when the *Bürgher*—the bourgeoisie—was the social faction that constituted it.

Although Kocka, in his own chapter, concedes that there are social movements, networks, and NGOs that extend beyond national borders, he nevertheless concludes on a skeptical note about the possibility of the emergence of a European civil society. One reason he gives for this skepticism is the fact that Europe, being essentially multilingual, lacks a single language through which the public spheres of its countries can interact. Claus Offe's contribution also raises the same issue. His investigation stems from what he calls the "disarticulation between societies and political regimes" (p. 172), the legacy of distrust and disaffection between citizens of member-states of the European Union, and, crucially, the lack of a common language for civil society.

Private businesses find a presence in Dieter Rucht and Susanne-Sophia Spiloti's separate contributions, and their roles are given different interpretations. In the former, they are part of a group that is the butt of criticisms from civil society organizations, and in the latter they make up what the author calls "corporate civil society." Spiloti derives this categorization from the actions of the German Business Foundation Initiative that broke from the state-centric approach of retributive justice and accepted that private businesses are "continuous, long-standing and inter-generational association[s] with moral duties" (p. 59).

All the writers in the book, save one, focus on civil society in Europe. Shalini Randeria, the exception, attacks the Eurocentricism of assumptions that civil societies do not exist in places other than Europe, and argues for multiplicity in the conditions of possibility of civil societies, drawing the conclusion that Western societies do not have a monopoly to the claim of having achieved civility in the public sphere.

The book carries much of the local in its flavour, perhaps on the understanding that Europe is one place where the differences between local and continental are becoming harder to distinguish. The volume sets out to present different perspectives on civil society, engaging the challenges, achievements, and current understandings of the phenomenon. In that regard, it is certainly a major

contribution by scholars in Europe to the analysis of the idea of civil society and how its social instantiation is currently being shaped and reconfigured in and by certain forces on the continent. Although one or two more contributions along the line of Randeria's corrective view would have been most welcome, one has to concede that the book's aim is to examine civil society *in* Europe.

Olumide Abimbola
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

John E. Trent, *Modernizing the United Nations System: Civil Society's Role in Moving from International Relations to Global Governance*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen & Farmington Hills, 2007, 285 pp., bibliography, index

More recent literature on international relations has begun to accept the idea that decision-making in the global arena is no longer just a responsibility and a prerogative of states. Traditional state-centric theories have been challenged and increasingly, researchers have gained an interest in the role of non-state actors in a new global governance system. Multilateral organizations have long been the subject of study of scholars who are interested in the relationships between states and supranational, overarching institutions. The United Nations (UN) is one of the most studied multilateral organizations, and it would seem as though this is just another book attempting to understand the complexities of the UN.

This volume attempts to examine the UN using an analytical lens that tries to bridge traditional and newer theories of international relations. Trent's overall argument is that there is a pressing need to reform the UN, and that the best solution to this urgent and much needed reform is "for citizens to band together to press corporations and politicians to work on the reforms" (p. xvi).

Although weak empirically, there are positive elements to the book. It is written in a style that appears to be like a personal account of the author's ideas on how the UN should be reformed. Admittedly, the book does provide an extensive literature review on international relations theory and provides an overview of the works that have emphasized the new role of civil society in the global governance system. Chapter 1 in particular sets the analytical framework.

As the book moves forward, there is an increasing emphasis on a descriptive account of the history of international institutions (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 argues that we are moving from domestic operations (transactions) to international/global policy arenas. The bulk of the book's analysis is presented in Chapter 4, where Trent makes numerous criticisms and offers suggestions as to how the UN's shortcomings should be tackled. Chapter 5 speaks to the global issues that require institutional development, including peace and security, sustainable development, and democracy; and it is here that the author robustly develops the idea that civil society can be a key actor in the complex issue of UN reform. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the main areas of reform, as well as who should play the major role in reforming the UN. Chapter 7 brings the book to a close with a description of the lessons learned.

The title of the book naturally leads the reader to expect an in-depth theoretical and empirical discussion of civil society. It is perplexing that this is not so in a book among whose self-declared objectives are an extended discussion of the role of civil society organizations in modernizing the United Nations system. A quick scan of the table of contents emphasizes the theoretical tenets of the United Nations as a multilateral organization, while civil society receives short shrift. As a result, Trent's book reads in part like a textbook on international relations.

Yet, we should not be too harsh on the author. While the writing sometimes strays into the first person account as mentioned earlier, it is still an interesting examination of the United Nations system. But the author would have written a better book if he had placed more emphasis on the role of civil society *throughout* the book. A more scholarly approach to the writing (rather than a somewhat personal account) would also have been preferable.

That said, Trent's book remains an interesting contribution to our understanding of the role of non-state actors in the transformation of the global governance system. It brings home the idea that civil society and governments can collaborate in the international policy-making arena. However, one should be cautious of suggesting a radical reform of the UN without having enough empirical data and case studies to offer solid proposals for reform. The proposals that Trent offers are very good, but it is necessary to move forward and take that next step: undertaking an in-depth, insider-view analysis of the UN system. It seems that scholars who wish to build on Trent's work already have their task cut out for them.

Raul Pacheco-Vega
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability,
The University of British Columbia, Canada

Lars Tragardh (Ed.), *State and Civil Society in Northern Europe: The Swedish Model Reconsidered*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2007, 280 pp.

Scholars of the "Swedish model" have historically pointed to various defining characteristics in an attempt to describe its attributes and failures, with varying success. Some point to the importance of labor unions, others to gender equality, and still others to the relatively homogeneous nature of the Swedish population. Lars Tragardh and other contributors to this volume emphasize what they believe to be a more fundamental characteristic: that the construct of social capital is an important feature in the Swedish civil society landscape; how much of it exists, how expansive it is, and more importantly, how relevant it is as a point of comparison to other civil societies. It is this latter point, namely, that the nature of Sweden's unique civil society owes its existence to a high level of social capital, and that this social capital, combined with trust in state institutions, creates a Hegelian "associative democracy" that is at the heart of this edited volume.

In articulating and defending this claim on the relation between associative democracy and social capital, the contributors go to great lengths to assert that, unlike Anglo-American models of civil society, the state and civil society are not

seen as diametrically opposed. In fact, through various detailed examples provided by the authors, it is shown that even though there exists a strong central government and that Swedes have historically placed much reliance upon centralized public administration, civil society activities have been allowed to flourish; for example in the form of "neutral organizations" where "state representatives and leaders from the organizations in civil society could meet" and foster trust between the state and civil society actors (Rothstein and Tragardh, p. 249). Indeed, this state–civil society relationship can be seen in the Swedish language: in many cases, *samhället* means both "state" and "(civil) society."

At times, however, this critical central point is lost on the reader through a somewhat disjointed presentation that includes other issues such as globalization and a roughly hewn inclusion of Norwegian data. These inclusions need not completely deter the reader as other notable points serve to throw a light on the current state of Swedish civil society and hypothesize on future trends. Of particular note is Jeppson Grassman and Svedberg's critique of the theory that a strong central government leads to an undermined civil society and a decrease in volunteerism. Additionally, they make the bold claim that non-organizational informal helping should be factored into the discussion of Swedish civil society. They readily acknowledge that this may add ambiguity, but advocate that ignoring these activities omits a vital feature of the Swedish sense of civicness. This suggests a fresh take on the widely accepted criteria for who is and is not part of the civil society puzzle and speaks to the relative nature of civil societies.

The book also provides a good overview of the historical influences that have shaped the current Swedish civil society, and offers insight into future challenges and opportunities. Rich in theoretical references, it is an essential resource in comparative studies of civil societies.

Sara Baird Amodio
Department of Global Leadership Studies,
Regis University, Denver, Colorado, United States

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, *The Politics of Sociability: Freemasonry and German Civil Society*, 1840–1918, (translated by Tom Lampert), University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbour, 2007, 413 pp., bibliography, index, $70.00

The first thing that must be said is that this is a fine work of social history covering a period and a topic that are probably not well or widely known, especially outside German Masonic circles. The author, and no less the translator, has thus rendered a very praiseworthy service.

The book is based on the author's 1999 dissertation at the University of Bielefeld. In his Preface, Hoffman defines his project as follows: "to explore the unintended political consequences of Enlightenment ideas and practices in an age characterized by the advent of nationalism, anti-Semitism and social discord" (p. ix). And near the end, he submits that: "Freemasonry illustrates the politically double-edged nature of civic humanitarianism. The moral and humanist claims that Freemasonry had raised

since the eighteenth century were always tied to an elitist social practice that aimed at establishing and maintaining distinction. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this contributed to the intensification of social divisions, the very divisions that moral universalism was supposed to overcome" (p. 290).

This is a provocative thesis, to be sure, but Hoffman succeeds brilliantly in demonstrating his contention, at least through this account of nineteenth and early twentieth century German Freemasonry. The subjects of the study were guided by a set of high-minded ideals and principles, among them "sociability," "civic virtue," "civility," "moral improvement," and the "universal brotherhood of man." De Tocqueville's idea of the "art of association" informs both the Masonic movement itself and this author's understanding of it. Set against these lofty ideals, however, there are glaring shortcomings. The phrase "brotherhood of man" was to be read literally. There were no women members, notwithstanding efforts by the "brothers," from time to time, to involve their "sisters" (their spouses). Membership was much more Protestant than Roman Catholic. (Indeed, the Roman Church had long been officially hostile to Freemasonry.) Social class exclusivity and its consequent prejudices were built-in. Some lodges were more aristocratic; others were more bourgeois in character, but virtually none included any tradesmen, much less working class men. In any event, application fees were set at a level which excluded all but wealthy upper classes. The inclusion or exclusion of Jews was hotly debated; some lodges accepted Jewish applicants, but others, by policy, rejected them. There were also political tensions within and between lodges—some were understood to be conservative-establishment in their outlook; others, more assertively liberal. Relations with the state became another source of tension; some lodges maintained a distance, whilst others encouraged and welcomed high officials to their membership. In some cases, lodges actually sought and received the protection of members of noble and royal families who did what was expected of them but, in turn, influenced the character of the lodges they chose to join.

Hoffman demonstrates very effectively the contradiction between external perceptions and internal realities of lodge life. The very secrecy of Masonic life and rituals, arguably necessary for self-protection in the eighteenth century, tended to feed groundless and irrational suspicions, most notably the idea of "Jewish-Masonic conspiracy" which became the subject of feverishly anti-Semitic tracts. Considering the ambivalence (and oft-times outright opposition) towards Jewish membership which prevailed in Masonic lodges throughout this period, the irony is striking.

Despite its many merits, the book presents some problems of accessibility. Hoffman probably assumed a certain level of knowledge that his readers educated in Germany and France would possess. For example, the virtual absence of the German unification of 1871 is curious. This would have been an event of enormous significance for the whole of German civil society. What the author does address well is the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871 because it demonstrated how war in general undermines universalism and cosmopolitanism and how this one in particular fanned nationalist and chauvinist tendencies within both French and German Freemasonry. That the war was used to create the conditions in which the German unification project could be consummated would suggest that the unification itself deserved more attention.

Something that would have been helpful for the uninitiated is a general chapter on the early origins and history of Freemasonry. In fairness, though, there are other works that cover that ground, and an additional chapter would have added to the length of this work.

There are some sobering lessons to be drawn from this fine piece of historical research. Those who adopt a too uncritical or even rosy view of civil society need to reflect on this fascinating tale of high ideals coming up against social and historical forces which they are not well equipped to withstand. Whilst it remains true that an effective democracy is unlikely to thrive without a vibrant associational life, civil society organizations are sometimes informed by very narrow interests and perspectives. The conflicts described in this study between universalist cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and religious, ethnic, and national identities, on the other, challenge us all to serious reflection.

Lawrence S. Cumming
Consultant in International Development and Civil Society,
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada